

David Andrew: Poet of the Mundane

FOR THE MAJORITY life is neither Jane Austen nor Catherine Cookson, it's, well, just life and "*Nothing much happens*" as the lift-worker in one of David Andrews's poems sums it up. Most of us end up in some kind of steady job we don't really want but don't hate *too* much, marry someone we meet in a pub, and spend great chunks of each day driving to and fro to work, getting the children to bed and doing the washing up. Weekends are made up of dramatic events like family outings to the nearest zoo or Amusement Park and a couple of pints with the mates. For the first time in human history the majority of the world's population now lives in towns, is woken up by alarm clocks not birdsong, and lives and dies surrounded, not by flowers and trees, but by man-made artefacts.

It is a signal, one might without exaggeration say colossal, achievement to find some 'poetry' in all of this, to portray minutely typical modern suburban life, yet nonetheless leave the reader with the impression that, after all, life is worth living. You won't find terrorists, Glaswegian junkies, third-world mercenaries or Belle de Jours in David Andrews's two attractively printed volumes of verse, *Through the Looking-Glass* and *Cemetery by the Sea*, just ordinary people doing ordinary things

*"8 a.m. Down the long valley the lights of cars
Swing like lanterns across the long fields."*

Passion presumably happened at some distant time and place but these poems are the work of an older man and the emphasis is on the sentiment that can in some cases miraculously persist between people who've lived together for decades without ending up by detesting each other. In a moving poem about his wife (who I happen to know has Alzheimer's but you wouldn't guess this from the poems) the poet recalls

*"That August day, you and I,
after your last unintelligible words had run out,
sat quiet holding hands
listening to the everlasting silence between our breaths."*

There is undoubtedly a touch of Chekhovian sadness about the figures who step out from these pages, none of them great failures or great successes, middling personages beginning to get past it and pausing a moment to "*look across their lives knowing they're going to die*".

On the whole though, the message is surprisingly cheerful — I nearly wrote ‘distressingly’ cheerful. “Life’s like that, we would have maybe preferred it to be otherwise but what’s the point? Better take it as it is.” Not a philosophy that will set the Thames on fire, but maybe the Thames is better without kerosene being poured all over it. Such a standpoint makes the systematic pessimism of the Thomas Hardy/Schopenhauerian variety appear what it perhaps is — immature.

Few poets write well about objects, and by objects I mean manufactured objects, lifts, buildings, cars and so forth. There was a brief burst of enthusiasm for the advent of asphalt, skyscrapers and automobiles at the beginning of the twentieth-century but it barely outlasted the Depression : poetry ‘went private’ once again and has more or less remained that way ever since, the environment barely gets a look in. But David Andrew, who I gather received a technical rather than ‘liberal’ education, is very much at home with the mechanical. His objects are as alive as his people —

*“the machinery
gets up.....the radio
waking itself, hunts from channel to channel
the world’s rumours”*

On the other hand, one could equally well put it the other way and say that many of his characters are presented to the reader more as biological factories than human identities

*“limbs stir,
as each disengages from their own
dreaming..... we turn a blank
page in the book of life
to continue yesterday’s story.”*

There is in fact a strange egalitarianism in David Andrew’s vision : sky, sea, houses, cows, radios, alarm clocks and human beings seem to have an equally valid claim to being considered ‘alive’. Everyone and everything pursues its own purpose which is apparently to have no particular purpose.

The closest literary analogy is Philip Larkin but Larkin, though he lived a fairly straightforward life compared to, say, Byron or Siegfried Sassoon (he lived in Hull and worked in a library) never married and never refers to family life except to take a swipe at it and thank his lucky stars he at least managed to escape *that* kind of Purgatory. Probably for this very reason, Larkin is more intense but also more petulant than David Andrew. The price you pay for systematically doing your own thing is being afraid of losing the person you spend most of your time with, namely yourself. Larkin was

obsessed with death (his own) but David Andrew doesn't seem to be particularly bothered: all in a life's work sort of thing.

The poet, though clearly an 'educated man' and with sound craftsmanlike skills in handling meter and adjectives, does not make an exception in his scale of values for literature and 'art' as so many irritating literary figures have done, witness Rilke, Mallarmé and James Joyce. What's so different about being a poet? Nothing much really. In *Two 'Older' Poets* the personages of the title discuss how

*"Once queen
of the arts, [poetry is] now a decent craft
(compare woodworking), a minority
sport, like snooker or bowls."*

The drinking companions conclude that their "*hopes and disappointments*" do not really mark them out from

"electricians, schoolteachers...or bus conductors"

In this small-scale universe peopled by placid nine-to-fivers, a good-looking girl roller-blading along the road ("*Roller-Blade Girl*") is a larger than life figure, a suburban Elizabeth Taylor.

I wrote earlier in this series that poetry should be 'universalised', should not get bogged down in the specific, in trivia. Yet this is precisely what David Andrew concentrates on — and somehow gets away with it. Plenty of poets have written about Naples, even Brighton — but Runswick Bay? Particularly since no one is drowning (or even waving) : there's not even a sexy girl in a bikini or some local Rock Hudson showing off his muscles, just

*"...twenty-two human beings and a dog. Of
which, numbers continually vary, eight or nine
would count as children."*

Instead of Wordsworth admiring the ruins of Tintern Abbey, we have the spectacle of a solitary (but not lonely) middle-aged poet looking down at the beach from the Olympian heights above with beside him a small tray containing "*coffee, milk, an apricot flapjack*". The day is not even a glorious one — it is overcast — and the only 'incident' on the beach below is when 'Dad' apologises because his dog has "*just 'weed' on sand city*". Our spectator retires (because the weather is changing for the worse), not to meditate on the transience of human effort but because it is

*"time to consider a suitable
flavour of ice-cream, to join the relentless noise of gulls."*

In a society frantically obsessed with youth (especially by those who no longer have it), David Andrew is the poet of age, or rather of *aging*, something of which young people are of necessity unaware. We feel in his writing the continuous pounding of the biological rhythms which are discreetly going about their business of sustaining the '*elegant engine*' (his name for the body) but which are inevitably fighting a losing battle. David Andrew is the poet of the Second Law of Thermo-dynamics, of the inevitable decline of order into disorder, cohesion into dissipation, strength into helplessness. The human fauna evens out : heroes and film stars end up the same as the people next door, i.e. dead. Only time is the victor since

*“each moment
is a moment gone”.*

And where is all this leading? To

*“a world before silence
where there’s no meaning to harm you,
no day beyond to which you belong....
you lie in this
world — before silence disentangles itself
into needs, into breathing.”*

This, possibly the best description I have ever read of Nirvana, comes from a poem about a sleeping child

*“You lie in a world without limits’
You lie in a world without meaning.*

Sleeping.”

So the serpent eats its own tail and the close of life’s drama is like

*“the end of an alley
I walk out of to where I began.”*

Interestingly, copying out these lines, I nearly typed “*to where I belong*”, same thing.

Strangely enough, the perpetual understatement which is such a feature of David Andrew’s poetry does not give rise to banality : why so? Partly because one senses that the poet is *not* without feeling : underneath there is passion, longing, disappointment and even anger which, just occasionally, is allowed to break out into the open like a buried river as in

*“So it’s hands up to confusion
and hands up to pray*

*for the lonely long for illusion
and the wicked are here to stay”.*

When David Andrew departs from the commonplace, he is actually much less remarkable. There are a few satirical pieces but the humour is to my mind a bit laddish, the put-downs too pat — though I did like *‘To Andy Warhol’*

*“Goodbye Andy Warhol,
Nothing dates more
Than being dead.”*

There are also one or two pieces about other poets that I advised him to throw out altogether — I personally have no time for poems about poets, or writing poetry, since I believe poetry should stem more or less directly from life, which by and large David Andrew’s magnificently does.

The best poems are about epoch-making achievements such as pegging an iron heron into the ground, or lying awake

*“Here, in the clockwork night
curtains drawn against the light....”*

wondering where life’s gone and whether it matters (it doesn’t really).

This is not a book to read through page by page : most of the poems are variations on the same theme but none the worse for that. One is reminded of the story about the stranger passing through a certain village where there were a lot of fiddlers playing. He noticed that one of the fiddlers kept playing the same note — not even the same tune, the same note. The stranger asked him how it was that all the other fiddlers were playing all sorts of different airs, but he wasn’t. The fiddler replied, “Ah! But the others are still looking for the right note — I’ve found it.”

The world could maybe use this kind of ‘wisdom’. It is, of course, identical with the message of Zen which, thankfully, is not mentioned in David Andrew’s poems — generally any book or person that mentions Zen is un-Zen by definition. Yi-hsuan, a Zen master, supposedly said :

“Only do ordinary things with no special effort : relieve your bowels, pass water, wear your clothes, eat your food, and, when tired, lie down! You see, there’s really not much to the Buddha’s wisdom.”

Similarly, there’s really not much to David Andrew’s kind of poetry — but that’s precisely what sets it in a class all of its own. A high class.

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